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ARCHIVE AND DOCUMENTATION

What is an archive?

In common parlance, the archive is a large repository of paperwork no longer in bureaucratic circulation.¹ Archives can be seen as active nexuses of unique documents that bear marks, objects, images, and inscriptions and enable researchers to recall and revisit individual and shared memories and histories.²

Archives confront the impossibility of storing everything. Traditional archives are usually organized by dominant powers, able to decide what is preserved and what is excluded.³ The archive often occupies a physical space where documents are gathered and organized; a space whose dimensions and systems of access often stagger the imagination; a space that becomes comprehensible only when destroyed (as happened when the municipal archive of the city of Cologne was partly damaged in 2011). The nineteenth-century objectification of linear time and historical process prompted a shift in the purpose of archives from legal depositories to institutions for historical research that were rooted in public administration.⁴

The word *archive* has roots in the Greek words *archeion* — meaning a government house, a house of archons or magistrates — and *archē*, or magistracy, rule, or government, and those roots were the point of departure for the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive.⁵ Derrida saw the archive as a physical, destructible locus of records that would disclose its meaning only in the future. His view of the “archive” also suggests a link with archaeology and its search for foundations or a founding principle.

Yet the archive is not only a physical space containing documentary materials; it is also memory, residue, and interpretation. Since Foucault, modern theories have extended the definition of the archive as a collection of records and the space that houses them to include a quasi-transcendental, metaphysical space.⁶ Thus the archive today can entail both a conceptual and a material approach to the formation of cultural memory. The media theorists and art historians Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel speak of “two bodies of [the]

archive” — an institution and a conception, a working space and a method.⁷ Efforts to name the role of an archive as a research practice have recently produced such terms as *archivology* and *archival sciences*. According to the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, the archive is a site of memory, occupying a place between the physicality of the stored material — the archival body — and the spirit that animates it, “pastness itself.”⁸ Yet if the archive were synonymous with memory, would it require a physical space? In his anthropological view, Appadurai conceives of an archive as a “deliberate” social project, a work of imagination.⁹ If the archive is our cultural memory,¹⁰ exclusion from it must involve forgetting. So archiving could be linked with exclusion and forgetting as much as with memory, if we follow Friedrich Nietzsche’s directive: that we must forget in order to imagine.¹¹ To destroy the archive would be the same as forgetting, which links us again to the archive as a physical space.¹² The archive, conceived either as a theory or a physical space, is a dynamic space of exchange and actualization; in the words of Foucault, the archive regulates and generates statements, thus highlighting the distinction between an archive and a library: the archive produces knowledge; the library stores it.

The museum archive and its documentary dimension

Contemporary art museums, as places where artworks are created, re-created, and reinstalled, have a unique role in forging and maintaining archives. The museum archive includes documents, files, and images related to the acquisition, maintenance, exhibition, conservation, insurance, and loan of artworks. Museum archives contain information not only about the objects in the museum but also about the professional group engaged with the institutional life of those objects. Often institutions that collect or exhibit multimedia artworks either participate in their technical development or facilitate their reinstallation, giving rise to a vast amount of material and nonmaterial data derived from these projects and ultimately processed by the museum’s archive and preserved in its records. The museum archive reflects simultaneously the impulse to archive everything and the impossibility of doing so. Although all institutions have archives, the archive of a museum — charged with caring for cultural, visual heritage — has a particular role in preserving records of the artifacts in its custody. Whereas many contemporary art museums adopt this role gradually, museums of modern and traditional art have long-established archival practices. The museum archive — and the museum as an archive — play a dominant role in creating the identity of the artwork.

The role of the archive in the museum may explain why archival work is so closely associated with musealization, the process of separating artworks from the “immediacy of life” — their previous vital function — and preparing them for their afterlife as museum objects.¹³ In his essay “Valéry Proust Museum,” Theodor Adorno discusses the association between a *museum* and a *mausoleum*, ascribing to the two words more than a phonetic analogy.¹⁴ Adorno echoes both Heidegger’s contention that artworks placed in a collection have been “withdrawn . . . from their own world,” and Hegel’s remark that “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.”¹⁵ Adorno, in juxtaposing Valéry’s and Proust’s views on art — Valéry emphasized the autonomy of the artwork, and Proust gave primacy to experience and memory — suggests that artworks must be sentenced to “death” in order to live. With the Adornian death and rebirth of objects in mind, and divorcing the archive from its exclusive “pastness,” one might conceive of the museum archive as a place where conservators and curators undertake the process of de- and re-activating artworks.

Dispersion of the archive

The museum archive consists of a network of microarchives housed in the departments of the institution. The archives of the museum's director, as well as those of departments in the museum, including curatorial, conservation, registration, and technical, gather an ever-expanding quantity of information and knowledge about artworks and their performance in the museum environment. Additional archives might also be formed: MoMA, for example, maintains an archive documenting the history of the museum itself as an institution. A microarchive, consisting of part of a museum's larger archive, is made accessible to researchers outside the museum according to conditions that are not always spelled out in a written policy. That microarchive omits material designated "for internal use only" (or containing confidential information). Moreover, the archives in a research library (like the ones at Museum of Modern Art MoMA in New York and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam) and sometimes an archive-within-an-archive at a museum (like the Nam June Paik Art Center in Yongin) — including artists' correspondence, memorabilia, or even multiples of the artists' works — contribute to the rhizomatic complexity of the archive.¹⁶ Consequently, the museum itself, as a locus of many heterogeneous repositories, can itself be seen as an archival space. Both the museum as an archive and the museum's archive (specific to its institutional culture, collection policies, and the size of the institution itself) shape the identity of an artwork in the museum's custody by determining what is — and can be — known about it.

In the day-to-day practices of an institution, microarchives in its departments are constructed simultaneously, with each department maintaining its own appropriately focused record of specific aspects of the work (such as its conservation record, registration record, and so forth). In other words, the separate repositories of object-related documentation disperse the archive throughout the museum.

The museum pins down all possible evidence related to an artwork. Conservators are noted for their professional dedication to documenting artworks, and to preserve their findings, the conservation department creates its own specific archive (in the case of large departments, this can even be split into subdepartmental archives). For instance, the conservation department of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media where I worked as a conservator maintains an extensive record of conservation, condition, and damage reports; exhibition and collection maintenance reports specific to each work (detailing daily maintenance procedures as well as reports of special requirements for works on display); and loan, storage-surveillance, and climate-control reports.

My experience in various museums suggests that the conservation archive is often a repository of remnants: leftovers from an artwork's installations, spare parts, replacement materials, and assembly instructions for pieces fabricated by the artist or disassembled in the course of maintenance. The conservation lab commonly retains elements of contemporary art and art created in situ that are not built into the exhibited piece; these often become a part of the material archive of a work. The conservation archive files may be accessible only in part, and sometimes only those with special permission or clearance are permitted to view them.

The department responsible for exhibitions provides a vast amount of contextual information on artworks. It might maintain a record of an artwork's past display and bibliography, correspondence with the artist, documents related to the context of the planned exhibition and provenance of the artwork; loan negotiations; ephemera such as flyers, exhibition posters, and notes; and even floor plans and drawings from past exhibitions and technical documentation on lighting, traffic flow, and room capacity.

Exhibition staff might also draw on (and contribute to) curatorial archives that reveal details about the creation of an exhibition or artwork, correspondence documenting the often close relationship between artists and curators, and material remnants of these partnerships and collaborations. Curatorial archives can also include records of an artwork's prior owners and exhibitions; documents of the acquisition process that might include information on an artist's galleries and agents and the donors and prior owners of artworks. Researchers value these bits and pieces of information for the insight they offer into the artistic attitudes and processes guiding the realization of a piece and the circumstances of its exhibition or acquisition. Only rarely are these archival materials accessible to people outside the museum.

The archive maintained by the registration department records the artwork during its time in the collection of the museum, including its commission, loans to external exhibition venues, storage, logistical issues such as transport and crating, and insurance data. The registration archive provides an overview of data on the artwork. Ideally, the collection management database is created in conjunction with the registration department's records. The registration archive (or a part of it) can sometimes be made available to researchers outside the museum.

The artwork can also be documented by photographs, notes, and the art-handling registers that record the unpacking of an artwork and its placement in a gallery or its crating and removal to storage. The photographic registry of the art-handling department is a source of site-related information about the condition of a work when it is unpacked or crated, its location in the exhibition space, and the institution's handling practices.

Institutions that collect media artworks have established departments that maintain playback and display equipment. A separate audiovisual department can preserve the artwork's video and film carriers, including backup and/or digitized copies. These technical records can be incorporated into the conservation archive or kept in the technical department. Again, the information is often accessible internally in a database (ideally interdepartmental). The digitizing of artworks and the archiving of digital-born artworks, moreover, has led to the establishment of a hybrid archive and repository for digital works. Because the field of media art conservation is just emerging, the ideal form for this archive has yet to be developed.¹⁷

Microarchives will continue to develop to house records relevant to artworks, including those of even such seemingly unrelated departments as building services, which might have records relevant to the effect of security, building maintenance, climate control, and the illumination of spatial settings in the galleries where large-scale multimedia artworks are installed; and departments of education, public relations, and event management, as well as research institutes, museum libraries, or the so-called media library (*Mediathek* in German), all of which can provide invaluable information. In smaller institutions, a microarchive might take the form of a personal archive gathered according to the professional orientation and interests of its creator.

The interrelation of the individual microarchives of a museum and the institutional archive as a whole is similar to the relation between the institutional archive and the larger cultural archive to which it contributes. Although the admitted "messiness" of the archival structures in a nascent discipline such as media-art conservation is defensible, there is no plausible explanation for the blurred boundaries of departmental archives in many museums. It appears to be caused by the conflict between the drive to classify and organize knowledge and the impossibility of classifying archival records clearly in accord with the temporal, cultural, economic, and political factors that condition them.¹⁸

Archive in practice

Research on the institutional history of an artwork requires that the researcher know how the microarchives of diverse departments function and what kind of information can be gathered from them. My research on *Arche Noah* (1989), one of Nam June Paik's multimedia artworks from the ZKM collection and one of the major case examples described in my book *Paik's Virtual Archive* (2017), was facilitated by my employment at ZKM and my practical involvement in the recovery of the artwork from the vault. *Arche Noah* consist of a wooden vessel which rests on a base decorated with large photographs of Mount Ararat, colorfully painted papier-mâché animals and two sets of TVs located on the vessel and around the base. On different occasions, banners and plants occurred in the life of the work. *Arche Noah* was acquired by the museum in 1989 from the Gallery Weisses Haus in Hamburg, exhibited, among others, and in an already altered form, on the occasion of *Multimediale 2* in 1991, and subsequently stored until 2006. In this year, I was involved in a recovery of the work from bits and pieces. I gathered information that was scattered throughout the institution: photographs and reports about the condition of the artwork; art-handling sheets giving details about the wrapping, crating, and securing of the work for transportation and storage; data about its relocation; and playback and display equipment, which was stored in the museum's external technical storage facility.¹⁹

I located traces of *Arche Noah* throughout the museum: disassembled planks, animals, and technical equipment in storage; documents in many archival registries; oral accounts and memories. All these findings — truly scattered, diffuse, and fragmentary — did not initially add up to anything physically identifiable as *Arche Noah*. Gradually, however, as I tracked diverse references and gleaned information from many departments, my image of the work began to crystallize. Its (re)materialization as an installation required help from and the creative involvement of conservators and, later, during the test reinstallation, a curator, technicians, and Paik's assistant. This process drew on a combined creative and interpretative use of archival documents and tacit knowledge.²⁰

Fragments, regions, and levels

The archive I describe here contradicts the ideal of a centralized, single, easily consulted locus of documents and materials, for I mined a dispersed system of institutional departments whose heterogeneity affects the construction of an artwork's identity. Recovering the diverse fragments of a work from such a dispersed archive necessitates a more flexible and multi-locational effort to define what the artwork is in the institutional domain of a museum. This decentralization is reflected in other ways as well. Artworks are registered not only in the collection that houses them but also in other institutions that lend and borrow works for temporary exhibitions. As a result, material traces and information about an artwork can be found outside the museum. When pursuing research on a particular artwork, one often has to investigate the archives of the artist and track down information from his galleries, collaborators, estate, family, and friends. The archival research on *Arche Noah* involved consultation with Paik's assistant and ZKM's technicians and curators. The archival research for *TV Garden* (1974), another of Paik's work described in my book, was more complex: the archives of three different institutions contained information on it, and each of those institutions, in its reinstallation, collaborated with different actors.²¹ Scattered and fragmented, the archive appears to be distributed across continents. And this is where, I believe, the work reveals its true *processuality* — not in the idea of being unfinished formally or physically, but rather in the impossibility of archival exhaustion, in the fact that the work is always more than what can be found of it or about it. The unbearable lightness of being — the topical



sentence of this publication — can be expressed in the serendipity of the archive, in the contingency of what is being found and what goes forgotten. In other words, when it is impossible to track down all the documents related to a work that has experienced a rich history of display and acquisition, no investigation into that artwork can be exhaustive; it can provide information on only a fragment of that artwork's existence. Any reconstruction of an artwork's biography based solely on its museum life or the documentation of its origins, moreover, can only be incomplete and fragmentary. According to Foucault: "The archive cannot be described in its totality. It emerges in fragments, regions and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater the time that separates it from us."²²

A work's identity is created on the basis of what the archive offers and what it withholds because of ruptures in its record, its belatedness, and its heterogeneity, and for this reason a researcher, curator, and conservator also confront a *lack* of documentation during their archival work. What lies between and beyond a gap in information, what is retrievable from it, may provide its own useful information. The construction of the identity of a multimedia artwork always depends on the information that is retrievable and accessible — within limits. This identity is formed on the basis of the archive, filtered through the present cultural context. The interesting question here remains: What do the archives make possible and what do they repress? Is all the materiality of an artwork archivable?

The system of accessibility

Access to museum archives is highly controlled, first, because some information, for political, economical, and strategic reasons, is not meant to leave an institution; second, because the fragmented, scattered structure of museum archives hinders accessibility; and third, because some museums do not give conservators full access to the curatorial archive, and vice versa.²³ The collection management database — if one exists — often gives limited, protected access to different departments.

In the course of my research for *Paik's Virtual Archive*, I encountered archives that, though inaccessible, nonetheless provided invaluable insights into their workings. For instance, my field research at the Nam June Paik Art Center in Yongin (in October 2012) yielded no physical data on Paik's installations in their collection, but I was able to glean a wide range of possibilities for interpretation by observing the works in situ and conducting discussions with members of the staff. On further reflection, I realized that even if the archives in Korea and Japan I consulted in my research had been wholly, formally accessible, culture and language would have imposed a significant barrier to eliciting information from them.

Another aspect of accessibility depends on the organization and storage of documents and other archival information in the museum archive, which can often become more relevant than the content of the archive itself. An archivist has authority over the configuration of the archive. In the conservation archive, the conservator controls and maintains power over the organization and content of the archive. The archive is heterogeneous, both because it is created from physically diverse materials and because it implements different technologies to accumulate and maintain its contents.²⁴ These technologies change not only the process of archiving but also the content archived.²⁵

To use the archive effectively, one must learn how it is structured and how it functions — knowledge seldom obtained by individuals who do not work in the museum and have daily dealings with the archive.

For example, my firsthand experience of the archive as a museum insider facilitated my research on *Arche Noah*, whereas with *TV Garden*, I could construct my knowledge on the basis of only the information made available to me as an external researcher. Knowledge of the *system* of the archive — the metadata, as it were, of archival knowledge that exists beyond the physical holdings — is key to accessing archival data effectively. A work reconstructed from a selection of incomplete documents results in imperfect records that can shape the work's future manifestations. For instance, the earliest realizations of *Arche Noah*, which were done with and without the plants, with and without banners, led to later versions, such as the one in the external exhibition venue at the Energie Baden-Württemberg where *Arche Noah* was decorated with plants. These versions permitted greater change and more modification. In this way the accessibility of archival data on a multimedia installation shapes its identity; a work reinstalled on the basis of a fragmentary archive enters the archival domain as a possible model for future materializations.

In conclusion

The museum archive /museum as an archive is an ever evolving space in which the flux of information is constant — a heterogeneous space with many points of access, all of which can affect the meaning of objects. The serendipity and unpredictability of retrieved information are interesting aspects of searching through an archive: we always find something other than what we are looking for — and what is to be found in the archive depends on where we enter it, that is, on our physical (location) and nonphysical (mental-cognitive) access. The greatest challenge in a well-functioning archive is the meta-structure of description and reference that enables users to retrieve information. The archive unveils its arcana only to those who engage with it on a conceptual level, where the information is created, where the resource is analyzed, and where one can learn about the economy of its function. The archive is a dynamic entity involving constant reorganization, addition, and loss. More than a physical realm of papers, files, and objects, it is also a conceptual realm of thought and interpretation, of tacit and embodied knowledge, and a condition of possibility for a multitude of readings.²⁶

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Endnotes

¹ Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008), ix.

² Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive, Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press; London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006).

³ Eric Kluitenberg, "Towards a Radical Archive," De Balie's Eric Kluitenberg, Institute of Network Cultures Weblog, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/weblog/2010/09/09/towards-a-radical-archive-de-balies-eric-kluitenberg/>. Foucault maintains that understanding the archive requires looking into the system of powers that determines what is archived and why, asking who created the rules governing the archive, and assessing the archive's political and material conditions. Thus, understanding the archive is key to understanding the system that rules it. Foucault criticized the archive as a static entity, containing things that were no longer part of a living culture. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁴ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, xii, 1.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9–10.

⁶ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

⁷ The archive always has two bodies: it is as much an institution as a conception, meaning a working place and method. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel, *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künste* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), 10.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, eds. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2 / NAI Publishers, 2003), 15.

⁹ Ibidem, 24.

¹⁰ For the archive as a cultural memory, see Aleida Assmann, "Archive im Wandel der Mediengeschichte," in *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, ed. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), 165–75; for the archive as a locus of memory, see Wolfgang Ernst, "Das Archiv als Gedächtnisort," in *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, ed. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), 176–200.

¹¹ Forgetfulness was essential to Nietzsche's philosophical project as an upholder of psychic order. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980 [1874]).

¹² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

¹³ See Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum: In Memory of Hermann von Grab," in *Prisms* (London: Garden City Press, 1967), 175–85. For the discussion of musealization, see also Chapter 1 in Hanna Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 17–29.

¹⁴ "The German word *museum* has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. . . . Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art." Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," 175. For the relation of museum to mausoleum, see also Friedrich Cramer, "Durability and Change: A Biochemist's View," in *Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage*, eds. W. E. E. Krumbein et al. (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), 23.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 39; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11. John Dewey, in *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), signals the negative effect that separating museum objects from the experience of everyday life can have on their perception. See: Tom Leddy, "Dewey's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2012), accessed January 1, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-aesthetics/>.

¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari refer to *Rhizome* as a mode of research that allows nonhierarchical entry and exit points in the interpretation and representation of data. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004 [1987]).

¹⁷ The recent development of the digital repository at MoMA might serve as an example.

¹⁸ For the implications of classification as a natural human compulsion, see Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000), 1–32 and 319–26.

¹⁹ As is often the case with media installations in large institutions, this equipment was not reserved exclusively for Paik's work but was also used in other installations—for example, in the reinstallation of Marie-Jo Lafontaine's and Fabrizio Plessi's works.

²⁰ For a discussion of tacit knowledge and its role in the actualization of the works from the archive, see “Memory, Tacit Knowledge, and the Nonphysical Archive” in Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 149-152.

²¹ In the case of *TV Garden*, I consulted Paik’s curators, Hanhard in the United States, Herzogenrath in Germany, Young Cheol Lee in Korea; Paik’s various technicians and assistants; and Paik’s galleries and their owners.

²² Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 130.

²³ During my research for the book *Paik’s Virtual Archive: On Time, Change and Materiality in Media Art* the Paik archives, donated by Paik’s estate to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, were inaccessible because they were being processed and classified.

²⁴ The archive reflects the technical and technological status of the time when it was accumulated. Computerized and digitized records, although they held great promise, failed to make the archive accessible to outsiders; only rarely is an external researcher allowed to browse the databank of a museum.

²⁵ See: Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narrative: The Meanings of Archives,” *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 134.

²⁶ Derrida maintains that every interpretation of the archive enriches it, and that is precisely why the archive is an anticipation of the future. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, quoted in Ketelaar, “Tacit Narrative,” 138.

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